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### Deposited in DRO:

22 July 2014

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Ward, S.C. and Bagley, C. and Lumby, J. and Woods, P. and Hamilton, T. and Roberts, A. (2015) 'School leadership for equity : lessons from the literature.', *International journal of inclusive education.*, 19 (4). pp. 333-346.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.930520>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor Francis Group in *International Journal of Inclusive Education* on 26/06/2014, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13603116.2014.930520>.

### Additional information:

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# School Leadership for Equity: Lessons from the Literature

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## Abstract

Responding to Thrupp's (2003, p. 169) call for writers on school leadership to offer 'analyses which provide more critical messages about social inequality and neo-liberal and managerialist policies' we use Foucault's (2000) theory of power to ask what lessons we might learn from the literature on school leadership for equity. We begin by offering a definition of neoliberalism; new managerialism; leadership and equity, with the aim of revealing the relationship between the macropolitical discourse of neoliberalism and the actions of school leaders in the micropolitical arena of schools. In so doing we examine some of the literature on school leadership for equity that post-dates Thrupp's (2003) analysis, seeking evidence of critical engagement with/resistance to neoliberal policy. We identify three approaches to leadership for equity that have been used to enhance equity in schools internationally: (i) critical reflection; (ii) the cultivation of a 'common vision' of equity; (iii) 'transforming dialogue'. We consider if such initiatives avoid the hegemonic trap of neoliberalism, which captures and disarms would-be opponents of new managerial policy. We conclude by arguing that, in spite of the dominance of neoliberalism, head teachers have the power to speak up, and speak out, against social injustice.

**Key words:** school leadership; equity; neoliberalism; new managerialism

## Introduction

In recent years, global demographic changes have placed new pressures on social inclusion, and economic disparities between and within nations have led Ainscow and Sandill (2010) to claim that the establishment of equity is the biggest challenge facing school systems throughout the world today. Goddard (2007, p. 5) identifies an 'increasingly ethnoculturally diverse global community' and suggests that the discourse of leadership and equity has developed in response to the 'great movements of people taking place around the world' (ibid, p. 1). While it appears that there is agreement that the discourse of school leadership and social justice is bound up with the concept of 'equity for all' in modern multicultural societies (Brown, 2004, p. 80), it is less clear how this 'new mantra' came into being (ibid). Most papers on school leadership and equity focus on *why* it is necessary (for example, to enhance race relations) and *how* it might be implemented (for example, through

prejudice reduction workshops), without interrogating the foundation of these ideas about social justice. In his analysis of the literature on school leadership, Thrupp (2003) identifies a tripartite split in the response to education policy amongst writers: 'problem-solvers' are apolitical; 'overt apologists' are supportive of contemporary policy, and 'subtle apologists' acknowledge problems around social justice but fail to interrogate the causes of these problems. Similarly, Raffo and Gunter (2008, p. 398) observe that literature on school leadership for social inclusion is 'both disparate and forks along two lines', either presenting a 'normative understanding' of equity, or adopting a critical stance. Thrupp's (2003, p. 151) analysis of the literature led him to conclude that most writers are 'subtle apologists' for neoliberal policy. It would be wrong to underestimate the difficulty of providing education for the most disenfranchised and marginalised groups (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010), yet the tendency to ignore the ideological basis of policy on equity means that the promotion of school leadership strategies is often presented as a 'natural' and non-contestable offshoot of policies, rather than a political action performed on the individual. Indeed, much of the literature contains assertions that are presented as self-evident truths, for example that school leaders are acting in an 'increasingly complex environment' (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p.2) and that we need to 'trust schools more and see them as the levers of reform' (Collarbone & West-Burnham, 2008, p. 6). The lack of critical engagement with policy on school leadership for equity is problematic in light of the claim that such policy is driven by an interest in competition and differential outcomes (Alexiadou, 2011) rather than parity between schools and pupils.

Responding to Thrupp's (2003, p. 169) call for writers on school leadership to offer 'analyses which provide more critical messages about social inequality and neo-liberal and managerialist policies' we use Foucault's (2000) theory of power to ask what lessons we might learn from the literature on school leadership and equity in order to enhance social justice in schools internationally. Foucault (ibid, p. 345) argues that the state has appropriated more and more power, and that contemporary power relations have been 'governmentalized'. At the same time, he argues that power relations are 'rooted in the whole network of the social' meaning that the individual has the ability to take 'action on the action of others' to reinforce or annul forms and specific situations of governance (ibid). Foucault (ibid, p. 346) uses the analogy of a 'game' to describe how individuals employ strategy to gain advantage

over others according to their perception of the rules of engagement. Thus while macropolitical power establishes the rules of the 'game', Foucault (ibid) argues that every power relationship contains the possibility of resistance or outright rejection, making the micropolitical arena as much about contestation of the rules as compliance with them. Our paper therefore aims to reveal the relationship between the macropolitical discourse of neoliberalism and the actions of school leaders in the micropolitical arena of schools, both in terms of how the discourse of neoliberalism permits governments to perform a particular action on the action of school leaders, and how school leaders respond to this action.

Our methodology is informed by Foucault's (2009) theory of the *discourse* as a culturally generated set of ideas that inform and create power relations within society. We do not, therefore, aim to provide a literature review that categorizes models of school leadership, such as transformational and servant leadership, although this type of literature review formed part of our background reading (for example, Leithwood et al (2010) and Earley et al (2012) offer highly informative accounts of the complex terrain of school leadership). Instead, our interest is in the transmission and reception of the discourse of school leadership for equity. In selecting literature for discussion we therefore looked for examples of compliance with, and resistance to, the discourse of neoliberalism, and read these papers in tandem with historical accounts of how this ideology has been culturally embedded over the last thirty years. Grady (2002, p. 3) cautions that every historicism has an allegorical dimension that encodes a 'story for the present' at the same time as vigorously attempting to reconstruct the past. Cogent of this tendency, this paper makes no claim to be a systematic or indeed exhaustive account of the development of school leadership theory. Instead, this paper endeavours to locate school leadership theory in a particular history of governance that, we argue, continues to exert powerful ideological restraints on social agents, including researchers and head teachers.

We begin by offering a definition of neoliberalism, new managerialism, leadership and equity. In so doing we examine some of the literature on school leadership for equity that post-dates Thrupp's (2003) analysis, seeking evidence of critical engagement with/resistance to neoliberal policy. Finally, we identify three

approaches that have been used by school leaders to enhance equity in their schools, and consider if such initiatives avoid the hegemonic trap of neoliberalism.

## **Neoliberalism**

The basic tenets of neoliberal theory are (i) that politicians should not make direct interventions to increase employment (Palley, 2005, p. 23) and (ii) that publicly owned assets should be privatised (Arestis & Sawyer, 2005, p. 199). Neoliberalism is, therefore, a reassertion of the *laissez-faire* economic policy of the Enlightenment (Hill & Myatt, 2010), and the curtailment of government activity is justified by neoliberals on the grounds that markets are better than bureaucracies at ensuring individual freedom and prosperity (Pollo, 2008). After her election in 1979, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher became the first European leader to begin the process of dismantling the welfare state in favour of the free market; a practice that accelerated after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the 'bipolar order' (UNESCO, 1996, p. 9) of communism and capitalism (Ward, 2013). Across the world, nations have embraced the so-called market solution of free trade, minimal government, privatisation and deregulation (Ramonet, 2008).

## **New Managerialism**

Davies (2003, p. 91) argues that the term 'new managerialism' is interchangeable with neoliberalism, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that new managerialism is the practical application of neoliberal philosophy. The aim of new managerial practice is to weaken the 'regulatory ethic and architecture' (Deem *et al*, 2008: 9) of 'embedded liberalism', defined by Harvey (2009, p. 11) as the 'web of social and political constraints' that conditioned the operation of entrepreneurial and corporate activities after World War II. In the UK, lack of parental choice over schooling and the 'unaccountable corporatist power of teachers' (Jones *et al*, 2008, p. 17) were targeted for eradication as manifestations of embedded liberalism. The imposition of new managerialism has gone hand-in-glove with the cultivation of what Deem *et al* (2008, p. 8) term 'market populism', defined as the philosophy that marketisation (i.e. opening the public sector to market forces) is the only realistic means to deliver efficiency and entrepreneurialism. For example, in 1991 the Parents' Charter was established to extend UK parents' choice over their children's education (DfE, 2014).

However, the resultant increase in 'consumer' control of public services has been accompanied by the increase in centralised control of these services. For example, in 1992 the Education (School) Act created a new non-ministerial government department, the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, to manage and regulate a national system of school inspection (Matthews & Smith, 1995, p. 23). This apparent contradiction of free market fundamentalism is explained by Crouch (2011, p. 170), who argues that neoliberal demands for a 'shrinking state' are targeted only at those activities associated with the democratic state as a provider of services for the population. According to Crouch (ibid), neoliberals seek the 'extension of official honours and symbolic privileges' to the elites, and will happily expand state bureaucracy for this purpose.

## **Leadership**

Under neoliberalism, the reframing of social interaction as a transaction between groups of highly motivated individuals who are seeking advantage for their members (Enteman, 1993) has given rise to an explosion of interest in leadership, with early managerial texts arguing that successful corporations are 'led by heroes' (Ball & Carter, 2002, p. 552). New managerialism is positioned as an inherently 'amoral science' (Locke and Spender, 2011, p. 104), and consequently strong leadership has been equated with the maintenance of authority when dealing impartially with the various interest groups established under new managerialism, such as school councils and parents' groups (see for example, English, 1992). Wright (2003, p. 139) employs the term 'bastard leadership' to refer to the capture of the discourse of educational leadership by the 'managerialist project', yet Alexiadou (2011) argues that head teachers have been *recast* as school leaders under the discourse of neoliberalism, and have been tasked with the mission to navigate a route for their school through the micropolitical environment of centrally imposed standards and consumer demands. From this we may surmise that the 'school leader' is a 'new managerial' construct, and that its insertion into the discourse of education represents a 'move' in the neoliberal macropolitical game.

## **Equity**

New managerial policy on school leadership for equity has developed internationally in response to concerns over social and economic inequalities (see for example, Donaldson's (2011) policy recommendations to the Scottish government on how to ensure equity in Scottish schools). This policy development appears to be at odds with neoliberalism's 'punitive' approach to welfare, which emphasises personal rather than collective responsibility for the individual's wellbeing (Macleavy, 2010, p. 133). An explanation of this apparent contradiction is offered by Brown (2006, p. 705), who argues that under neoliberalism the citizen is conceptualised as both a consumer and the subject of significant managerial control; a supposition supported by Davies (2003, p. 93), who argues that neoliberalism relies on a 'complex combination' of two forms of morality: compliance and personal responsibility. Armstrong (2010, p. 187) is critical of the neoliberal 'privatization of responsibility': in lieu of the welfarist notion of the 'collective pooling of risk' we conceptualise instead the individual as responsible for ensuring his/her success in the free market by gaining credentials for employment. Equity is thus theorized in neoliberal education policy documents as the 'removal of barriers to engagement and achievement' that might otherwise inhibit disadvantaged pupils' ability to 'participate, engage and succeed in various aspects of mainstream life' (Raffo & Gunter, 2008, p. 398) rather than the radical revision of mainstream life.

The neoliberal mantra of personal responsibility has been attacked by supporters of the rights of vulnerable groups, such as the disabled and their carers (see for example, Pinto, 2010; Luxton, 2010). However, the discourse of personal responsibility is also applied to more powerful groups such as school leaders, and is considered oppressive in this context too. In her study of the English initiative, 'Schools in Challenging Circumstances', Lupton (2005) argues that the UK government's education policy lays responsibility for social justice firmly at the door of principals and teachers. According to Lupton (ibid, p. 591), the discussion of inequity of results is 'dominated by references to the poor practice of heads and teachers' when, in reality, inequity of results is the product of 'widespread material poverty' outside the school (ibid, p. 594) that obliges teachers to divert teaching time into pastoral activities (ibid, p. 598) and forces principals to divert strategic planning time into policing pupil behaviour and liaising with external agencies (ibid, p. 599). Lupton (ibid, p. 602) argues that equity of results will not be achieved through

improvement measures that concentrate on 'upskilling and motivating staff' and that fail to address systemic constraints on social justice. Likewise, Ball (2012, p. 35) is highly critical of what he terms the 'new professionalism', whereby social actors are required to take 'responsibility' and have "appropriate" reflexive moral capacities', often in relation to issues that reside beyond their understanding or control. A prime example of this is the structural constraints on equity identified by Lupton (2005): it is simply unreasonable to expect educators to 'take responsibility' for issues of material poverty that undermine pupils' educational performance.

Neoliberalism's myopic moral vision, coupled with its 'amoral' enforcement through new managerialism, has produced an impoverished account of social justice: in spite of the plethora of papers on school leadership and inclusive education, Furman (2012, p. 193, citing North, 2006) describes social justice as an 'under-theorised concept in education'. Harris *et al* (2003, p. 164) offer a possible explanation for the paucity of theory on social justice, arguing that, under neoliberalism, equity has been firmly positioned as equal access to a system of education that meets global standards, measured through such things as PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment. According to Harris *et al* (ibid, p. 164) neoliberal education policy has in fact disadvantaged 'many inner-city, migrant and socially deprived communities', where 'an increasing number of children' are, for whatever reason, 'unable to cope with a national curriculum'.

In the UK, the decade-upon-decade fall in social mobility and the increasing wealth gap between the richest and poorest members of society (Resolution Foundation, 2013) appear to indicate that neoliberal education policy is failing to enhance social justice. This finding is not, perhaps, surprising given that the acceptance of inequality in the market society is fundamental to neoliberal thinking. Neoliberal theory states that wages for different activities are the outcome of the impersonal forces of supply and demand, and according to the marginal productivity theory of income distribution, 'you're worth what you can get' (Hill & Myatt, 2010, p. 169). This argument extends to education, where pupils' value is measured in terms of the credentials that they gain. According to 'tournament theory', the salaries/credentials of the top performers are like tournament prizes that increase the productivity of everyone who strives for them (Ward, 2010, p. 205). As in any competition, there are



winners and losers, and many politicians have been unapologetic over the fact that neoliberal policy *must* result in inequality. For example, in 1975 Margaret Thatcher declared that 'The pursuit of equality itself is a mirage. Opportunity means nothing unless it includes the right to be unequal and the freedom to be different' (Thatcher in McSmith, 2010, p. 11). More recently, the Mayor of London Boris Johnson (2013) questioned the feasibility of economic equality, claiming that 'some measure of inequality is essential for the spirit of envy' as it is 'a valuable spur to economic activity'.

Not surprisingly, then, various writers on school leadership have voiced doubt over the political commitment to social justice in schools. For example, in her study of school leadership and equity in Slovenia, Trnavcevic (2007, p. 79) states that Slovenia has undergone 'a radical adjustment from a socialist, planned economy to a market-driven economy', and argues that school leaders are employing inclusion strategies to 'strengthen the 'market position' of the school' (ibid, p. 88) rather than promote social justice. Fitzgerald (2009, p. 155) claims that in New Zealand 'access to schools has been rationalised' so that 'a particular group, the middle classes, can exercise their choice with regard to the school, and ultimately the university, to which they send their child'. Fitzgerald argues that teachers have been repositioned as 'producers of commodities' (i.e. students' skills and knowledge) that can 'contribute to the national and global economy' (ibid, p. 157), and suggests that the identification and measurement of standards in education is 'a compensatory attempt to create an imagined community of sameness' that obscures the advantage that marketisation confers upon the elite (ibid, p. 158).

The problems identified by these writers appear to confirm Ball's (2012, p. 34) theory that the construct of school leadership is bound up with performativity and 'governing by numbers', rather than equity. Ball (ibid) claims that 'leadership is a means of reworking and narrowing the responsibilities of the practitioner by excluding "extraneous" issues that are not directly related to performance outcomes'. If Ball is correct, then policy on school leadership and equity has been implemented by governments as a means to identify and exclude factors (e.g. ethnicity; socio-economic status) that may inhibit national education performance, which is measured through PISA to produce performance league tables for international

comparison (OECD, 2010). Arguably, the standards agenda is incompatible with the account of equity as the reduction of social injustices that affect people's lives: as noted in Fitzgerald's (2009) critique of education policy in New Zealand, the standards agenda creates a spurious meritocracy that favours the interests of middle class pupils.

### **The implementation of school leadership for equity**

Perhaps surprisingly, given the amount of literature on school leadership and equity, Furman (2012, p. 192), flags up the shortage of literature about the actual *practice* of social justice leadership in K-12 schools and the capacities needed by school leaders to engage in social justice. Furman (ibid, p. 192) also notes that the 'literature on leadership preparation is thin in regard to explicit methods for developing these capacities'. Furman suggests that a preoccupation with the raising of consciousness, rather than action-oriented behaviour, may account for this deficiency in the literature, which she attempts to address through her account of *praxis*. However, in spite of Furman's reservations, the literature does provide examples of how school leaders have attempted to foster a climate of inclusion and equity in their schools. Below, we identify three approaches that have been used in schools in diverse nations: (1) critical reflection; (2) the cultivation of a 'common vision', or shared policy on social justice; (3) 'transforming dialogue'.

#### **1. Critical reflection**

Brown (2004, p. 79) acknowledges that there are 'conflicting views of social justice' in the USA, but that nevertheless it is 'clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis.' Seeking to redress this wrong, Brown (ibid, p. 77) recommends a series of activities that constitutes a 'process-oriented model' to prepare educational leaders who are 'committed to social justice and equity' for ethnic minority and low socio-economic status pupils. Brown (ibid, p. 89) claims that critical reflection, which she defines as 'the examination of personal and professional belief systems, as well as the deliberate consideration of the ethical implications and effect of practices' is the first step towards transformational practice. Consequently, a number of activities advocated by Brown, such as the production of cultural autobiographies and

reflective analysis journals, are designed to stimulate the school leader to reflect upon his/her own cultural background in order to develop anti-racist work in schools. This inward reflection is then complemented by activities designed to stimulate critical reflection on the experience of minority groups. For example, prejudice reduction workshops offer 'a series of incremental, participatory activities that empower individuals of all ages and backgrounds to take leadership in building inclusive communities in their workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods' (ibid, p. 100). Through 'educational plunges', participants are encouraged to 'select an activity that will challenge them to move beyond their present level of comfort, knowledge, and awareness and yet not be so uncomfortable or threatening that they are unable to be open to the "minority experience"' (ibid, p. 101).

## **2. The cultivation of a 'common vision' of equity**

A similar attempt to understand and engage with the minority experience is evident in Niesche and Keddie's (2011) study of leadership practices within a secondary school in Australia. Niesche and Keddie (2011, p. 66) describe how 'a common vision about the significance of equity' has been developed and sustained through the work of the school's Equity and Action Group (EAG). This group was established in 1996 'in conjunction with a state government initiative encouraging schools to address issues of social justice' (ibid, p. 69). The weekly EAG meetings enable guidance officers, administrative staff, teachers and therapists to meet and share their ideas and concerns about social justice, and the interventions that are developed by the EAG are 'geared towards reducing the negative effects of the students' specific material and cultural disadvantages' (ibid, p. 69). They include the development of support groups for refugees and immigrants; extra language and mathematics support; music and art therapy; family services, and 'acknowledgement of Indigenous heritage and issues through the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee week' (ibid, p. 69). Niesche and Keddie (ibid, p. 70) report that members of the EAG describe it as 'the school's "guardian of equity"' and a source of 'collective wisdom'.

## **3. 'Transforming dialogue'**

The development of 'collective wisdom' is linked to transformational language practices in Wood's (2011) study of how we might shape a democratic future by transforming education policy. Woods (ibid, p. 134, italics in original) identifies a 'democratic approach' to leadership that 'reflects a valuing of student voice and professional participation' and in particular aspects of '*transforming dialogue* which aims to enhance understanding'. Woods describes a UK secondary school that has a Leadership Forum similar to the EAG reported by Niesche and Keddie (2011), but which supplements this forum with a School Council. The School Council meets once a month to discuss problems and develop action points in response to issues that pupils put forward via 'student representatives' (Woods, 2011, p. 137). These issues include such things as the school dress code and access to the library at lunchtime, and the pupils believe that the School Council system 'works well' and is democratic (ibid, p. 137). In the words of the Head Boy: "'The smallest person with the quietest voice can make a difference' through the School Council' (ibid, p. 137). According to Woods, the model of distributive leadership adopted by this school enables the school principal and 'students in key positions' to both play roles 'as critical democratic actors' (ibid, p. 135). Similarly, in their study of school leadership and equity in New Zealand primary schools, Robertson and Miller (2007, p. 100) identify 'Team Talk' as 'a very inclusive way of actively including every child in the school in discussion and play'. Before lunch and playtimes, 'the class, as a community', sits together in a circle, and the children 'plan among themselves what would happen when they went out to play, as 'an inclusive way of dealing with any potential problems' (ibid, p. 100).

In some of the literature on leadership and equity, the development of transforming dialogue is supplemented by the gathering of background data. For example, in her study of the utility of transformative leadership theory in practice, Shields (2010, p. 560) explores the practice of two US school principals 'who have successfully "turned their schools around," making them more inclusive, socially just, and academically successful'. The first principal identified small groups of 'willing teachers'; asked them to collect data about the background and progress of every child in the school (ibid, p. 575), then convened a series of staff meetings to develop teaching methods informed by the pupils' disclosed needs. The second principal that Shields writes about made use of frequent staff meetings, similar to those reported

by Niesche and Keddie (2011) and Woods (2011). These meetings focused on 'trying to understand the needs' of students from disadvantaged families (Shields, 2010, p. 576) and led to pedagogic and pastoral interventions. For example, a 'community partnership' was developed with retirees from the community to benefit those pupils who lack 'the consistent presence of a caring adult in their lives' (ibid, p. 576). Although the approaches of both principals led to school improvement, Shields (ibid, p. 578) expresses the belief that the principal who collected data about the background and progress of every child 'was more explicit and more intentional in her use of power to transform'.

### **The hegemonic trap**

Thrupp (2003, p. 169) argues that there is 'no intellectually sound way' that managerial reform can be accurately or ethically presented as unproblematic. We agree with Thrupp's analysis: new managerialism is the *modus operandi* of neoliberalism, a morally bankrupt ideology that seeks to exploit the working classes to channel surplus wealth upwards (Shaoul, 2010; Harvey, 2009) while positioning vulnerable individuals as responsible for their own (mis)fortune (Armstrong, 2010). In this paper we have identified three approaches to leadership for equity that may be utilised by school leaders interested in social justice, but the question we must ask is: do these approaches *genuinely* liberate individuals from the neoliberal values of compliance and personal responsibility?

According to Foucault (2009), discourses such as 'school leadership for equity' are a culturally generated set of ideas that inform and create power relations within society. These ideas may be embraced or disrupted by counter-discourses, as all power relations contain the possibility of resistance (Foucault, 2000). Critical reflection, as presented by Brown (2004), appears to offer a new approach to social justice based on the cultivation of empathy, and therefore seems likely to disrupt the discourse of neoliberalism. However, initiatives such as educational plunges, which seek to develop an understanding of social-exclusion that is de-coupled from the analysis of the socio-economic basis of social exclusion, are informed by new managerialism's rejection of 'embedded liberalism' (Harvey, 2009, p. 11) and therefore re-articulate, rather than reject, neoliberalism. Wood's (2011) 'transforming

dialogue' and Niesche and Keddie's (2011) Equity and Action Group appear to be specifically designed to foster counter-discourses. However, the social model of new managerialism, which defines society as 'nothing more than the summation of the decisions and transactions which have been made by the managements of the organizations' (Enteman, 1993, p. 157-158), informs 'consumer' group meetings with pupils and the wider community. Consequently, educationalists who seek to empower disadvantaged groups by endorsing these new managerial solutions to inequity tacitly endorse neoliberalism, in process described by Thrupp (2003, p. 151) as 'subtle apologism'. Similarly, Shields' (2010) account of pedagogic and pastoral interventions for school improvement appears to be indicative of the desire to establish a counter-discourse that favours the interests of disadvantaged pupils. However, this approach to social justice is equally indicative of an interest in neoliberal managerial practice. In her critique of new managerialism, Davies (2003) states that:

...new managerialism relies on habitual, internalised surveillance, through which the conduct of conduct is carried out, to press subjects into making and remaking themselves as legitimate and appropriate(d) members of the latest shift within the particular new managerialist systems that they are caught up in. The requirement of 'continuous improvement', and documented individual commitment towards and striving for it, is one of the strategies for creating this continually changing individual. (Davies, 2003, p. 93)

If school leaders adopt strategies to promote social justice as part of their professional 'continuous development', then their action supports new managerialism, and cannot be construed as a counter-move in the power game as envisaged by Foucault (2000). According to Smyth (2008, p. 224-225), new managerialism has corrupted and corroded what it means to live and work in schools. We would go further, arguing, after Galambos (2011), that it has created a hegemonic trap that captures and disarms would-be opponents of neoliberalism, as demonstrated in the three approaches to school leadership and equity discussed above, all of which offer hope of resistance to neoliberalism but which fail to articulate a counter-discourse.

## **Conclusion**

We began this paper by asking what lessons we might learn from the literature on school leadership and equity in order to enhance social justice in schools around the world. In so doing, we have identified three approaches that may work towards this end: (1) critical reflection; (2) the cultivation of a 'common vision' of equity, and (3) 'transforming dialogue'. The literature provides evidence of the feasibility of these approaches, yet having listened to the arguments put forward by theorists such as Ball (2012) and Lupton (2005), it would be naïve to suppose that social justice may be secured by simply applying such things as 'transforming dialogue' without questioning the ideological basis of such initiatives. Although numerous researchers, such as Fielding (2006) and Hatcher (2005), have spoken out against marketisation, our review of the literature on school leadership for equity suggests that many writers do not attempt to discredit or reject the cultivation of the neoliberal values of compliance and personal responsibility. In spite, then, of Foucault's (2000) claim that all power relationships contain the space for resistance, it seems that a hegemonic trap has been created through the repetition over time of a neoliberal discourse of equity that has captured and threatens to silence 'textual dissent' (Thrupp, 2003, p. 163).

In writing this paper we have located ourselves outside the three positions identified by Thrupp (2003). We are not 'problem-solvers', 'overt apologists' or 'subtle apologists'. Our analysis suggests few prospects to solve the problem of inequity and we have identified school leaders as complicit, albeit unintentionally, in sustaining a neoliberal hegemony for which there can be no apology. Our critical stance confronts us with the perennial dilemma of critical theorists: how to act when analysis suggests little potential to do so. We have suggested that leaders and those like us who write about leadership imagine that we have agency, yet in reality we have little. Over thirty years ago, reporting his classic study of the disenfranchisement of the working class in education, Willis (1977, p. 186) reached similar conclusions. Yet he demanded that despite the potency of ideologies, structures and processes that embed inequity in education, we must nevertheless have something constructive 'to say about what to do Monday morning'. We have identified three approaches which might encourage greater reflection and engagement with inequity. There is little hope that the preparation and development of leaders, at least in the UK, would support the kind of dialogue and vision making

we suggest. Rather, critical dialogue is being stripped from teacher and leader preparation (English, 2006). Nevertheless, leaders potentially retain their voice, as do we, even when buffeted by the pressures of a neoliberal hegemony. Hirschman (1970) presented three options: exit, voice and loyalty. Exit is not an ethical option when children do not have such a choice. We have exposed the consequences of the loyalty of overt and subtle apologists in the system. Voice is all that remains: 'In the whole gamut of human institutions, from the state to the family, 'voice' however "cumbrous" is all their members normally have to work with' (ibid, p. 7). Though the context we have depicted is unpropitious, though agency may be weak, school leaders retain the power to speak up, to speak out in the ways we have outlined, and to empower children to do so also. As Hirschman (1970) observes, it may be, realistically, all that we have to work with.

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